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# Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

## The Fallacies of Rationalism and Utopianism

Throughout the novel, the Underground Man makes a convincing case against the "rational egoists" and utopian socialists of his era, who claimed that the application of reason alone could perfect the world. Believing that destructive behavior results from a misguided sense of profit, these theorists thought that if everyone in the world understood what was really in their best interests, they would never do anything irrational or destructive. If the natural laws that governed human behavior could be understood, through reason, utopia would indeed be attainable.

The Underground Man opposes such a view because he believes that it underestimates the human desire for free will. He argues that humans value the ability to exert their own will—even if it runs contrary to their best interests—more than they value reason. The Underground Man's masochistic tendencies illustrate this theory. Rather than submit to the "law of reason" that dictates that only doctors and dentists can cure liver disease and toothaches, the Underground Man prefers to suffer his ailments in silence, even though this decision only brings him more pain. This example is absurd, almost parodic, but it emphasizes the Underground Man's point about human nature. Dostoevsky himself was highly suspicious of utopian socialists, worrying that their desire to codify rational human behavior ignored the complex nature of human beings. The freedom these utopian socialists preached could too easily lead to total uniformity—a uniformity that could lead to totalitarianism.

## The Artificiality of Russian Culture

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Russian social and intellectual elite had been imitating western European culture for decades. A nineteenth-century Russian man was considered "developed" and "educated" if he was familiar with the literary and philosophical traditions of Germany, France, and England. The Underground Man, with his intelligence, consciousness, and sense of the "beautiful and lofty" (a term borrowed from European philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant), considers himself a "developed man of the nineteenth century." He tells us that, in his youth, he tried rather earnestly to live by the ideals he found in European literature and philosophy. Though Dostoevsky may have shared this fascination with European culture in his own youth, by the time he wrote *Notes from Underground*, he had decided that such pervasive European influence on Russia was destructive. Captivated by the West, Russian intellectuals had lost touch with the true Russian way of life the peasants and lower-class workers still practiced. To restore national unity and harmony, Dostoevsky called for a "return to the soil," emphasizing Russian values of family, religion, personal responsibility, and brotherly love over European "enlightenment," scientific progressivism, and utopianism. The Underground Man's European influences are partially responsible for driving him "underground," as his attempts to live by a foreign set of values meet with failure and frustration.

## Paralysis of the Conscious Man in Modern Society

Throughout the novel we see that the Underground Man is unable to make decisions or take action with confidence. He explains that this inability is due to his intense degree of consciousness. The Underground Man is able to imagine the variety of consequences that every

action could have, he is aware of the possible arguments that can be made against every statement, and he is conscious of the multiplicity of different motives that inform every decision he makes. As a result, the Underground Man sees that every choice a person makes is more complicated than it may seem on the surface. This complexity throws every decision into doubt. Action becomes impossible because it is impossible to determine the best course of action to take.

In earlier times, when religious and moral imperatives existed, people allayed any doubts about action and decision by following these imperatives in absolute confidence. In the modern era, however, most of these absolutes have dissolved. The only people who can act with confidence, according to the Underground Man, are narrow-minded people who are too stupid to question themselves. The one remaining absolute, according to the Underground Man, is reason. Even educated men pursue the laws of science and reason without questioning them. The Underground Man—along with Dostoevsky himself—believes that such mindless adherence to the laws of reason is misguided. Dostoevsky does not necessarily believe, however, that total inaction is the best strategy for conscious people. He does believe, though, that an active person with a totally fixed mind—one that is not open to different possibilities—is more dangerous than an inactive person whose mind moves and changes.

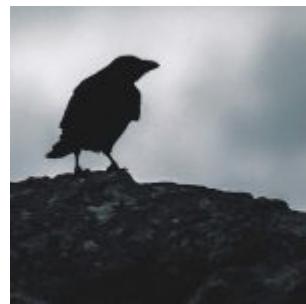
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